The Natural Resource Challenge promotes education and stewardship in John Day Fossil Beds

by Tom Rodhouse and Lisa Garrett

IN 2002, BIOLOGISTS TOM RODHOUSE AND Alan St. John brought learning and volunteer opportunities to educators and their students in the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, Oregon. The two were contracted by the National Park Service Northern Semi-Arid Network to conduct the Natural Resource Challenge biological inventory of birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. Tom and Alan arranged for school groups, community volunteers, and NPS interpreters to meet them in the field and lend their eyes, ears, and hands to aid the project.

"Kids are great at finding stuff and they can cover a lot more ground than I can alone," according to Alan, a herpetologist, after an outing with young volunteers in a search for the elusive pygmy short-horned lizard. "Plus, it's great fun for them and they certainly are learning at the same time."

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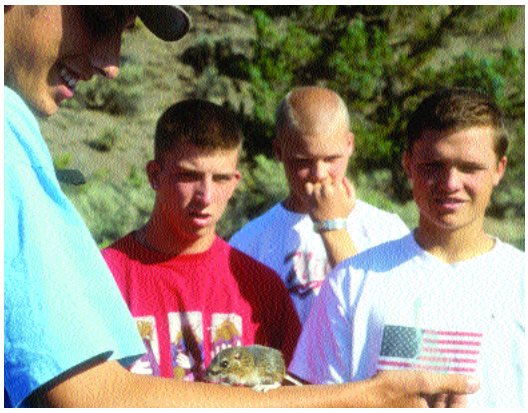
In exchange for their help, volunteers are rewarded with exciting close encounters with park animal species such as bats, pocket mice, and rattlesnakes. The use of volunteers is a great introduction to citizen involvement and stewardship in national parks. Many volunteers are surprised at the diversity of animals in the John Day Fossil Beds, and their enthusiasm is increased as they realize the importance of this first-ever comprehensive inventory to park management.

Although located in remote eastern Oregon, John Day Fossil Beds is frequently visited by school groups from across the state. Hancock Field Station, an Oregon Museum of Science and Industry environmental education camp, is located in the national monument and provides an excellent link between students and science activities at the park. Field station instructors were recruited as volunteers early in the summer season and were able to incorporate inventory activities into their school programs and summer camps.

National Park Service staff also provide educational programs to visitors. The experiences they have gained working with the biological inventory have enhanced their knowledge of natural resources in the park and enriched the content of these programs. Several staff members have even become regular after-hours assistants on bat mist-net outings for the inventory.

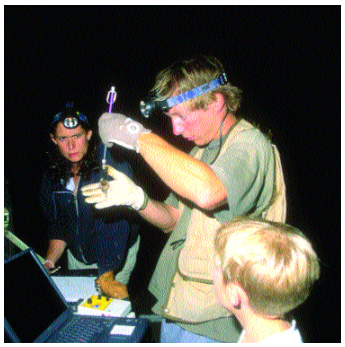
John Day Fossil Beds is an interesting site in which to conduct a biological inventory given its spectacular fossil record. For example, a group of Oregon State University biogeography students recently spent a morning working in the field with the small mammal inventory and an afternoon in the lab visiting the monument's mammal fossil collection. The group's instructor, Dr. Mary Santelmann, has brought students to the park before, but was very excited that this year students could get out in the field with scientists studying present-day fauna. "There is something about holding a small furry creature in your hand that engages the imagination. When the students looked at fossil teeth, bones, and skulls, I could see they were starting to 'see' the animal and not just the pieces."



NPS PHOTO BY TOM RODHOUSE

High school students closely examine a kangaroo rat in John Day Fossil Beds National Monument as part of the first comprehensive inventory of park mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians. School groups, volunteers, and NPS interpreters all played roles in the surveys, increasing their appreciation of park biological diversity, management, and science.

Volunteer involvement in the 2002 John Day Fossil Beds inventory was largely an informal and spontaneous arrangement. Tom and Alan, who have both worked as educators in the past, met with volunteers and students when schedules and activities coincided. The benefits to the National Park Service inventory and the public were clearly demonstrated in 2002. Tom and Alan both hope to see increased citizen involvement in the inventory in 2003 and will be looking for ways to formalize arrangements with educators to involve students. ■



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Biologist Tom Rodhouse weighs a Yuma myotis bat. The inventory revealed baseline species information for management and presented excellent learning opportunities for school-age students and adult volunteers alike.

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